The Government must honour its side of the bargain — the industry’s view

By Trevor Jones

Patient packs are currently produced for almost all prescription medicines, whether branded or generic, but these are sometimes broken open to meet varying prescriptions. Pharmacists are, of course, obliged to dispense what the doctor has prescribed and, in most circumstances, if the prescription states that 30 tablets are required, 30 tablets must be dispensed. If the patient pack comprises 28 tablets — as most do — then two extra tablets have to be snipped from another pack. This does nothing for the patient’s confidence either in the integrity of the pack or in the professionalism of the NHS, the pharmacist or the pharmaceutical industry.

Part of the Government’s commitment to the campaign was to conduct a communications exercise with doctors so that they could automatically and easily indicate that a patient pack should be dispensed. It was also to give pharmacists powers to be able to alter a doctor’s prescription within a certain tolerance, for example, from 30 tablets to 28 or vice versa. A safeguard was included so that, if for some clinical reason, it was essential for a patient to receive a non-standard number of tablets, this would happen.

A calling situation

Yet the Government has steadfastly refused to honour its side of the bargain. As the pharmaceutical industry has invested many millions of pounds in ensuring that its production lines are geared up to producing its medicines in patient packs, this is particularly galling to us. Pharmacists must feel equally frustrated that they are still having to spend time cutting up packs and answering resultant queries from patients.

Another major concern for the industry and for pharmacists has been the recent Government proposals to allow pharmacists to photocopy vital information leaflets about medicines, in breach of copyright laws. At the same time, the Government plans to give every pharmacy in England and Wales £500 to spend on photocopying equipment. Frankly, this is poor way for Government to get best value; the money should be spent putting a better scheme in place.

In effect, the Government is planning to ensure that the law on provision of PILs is obeyed by breaking another — that on copyright of printed material. At the same time, the whole system of photocopying leaflets is fraught with dangers that could well compromise patient safety. It is hard to understand why the Government is content-plating this plan when the rest of Europe long ago decided that it wanted patients to get information about their medicines in the best possible way, and has experienced no difficulties in dispensing patient packs.

Allowing pharmacists to photocopy PILs could mean breaking open the pack for no other reason than to get a sample leaflet, with the grave possibility of confusion over which leaflet belongs with which pack. In addition, it would result in a severe breach of the quality assurance of the pack intended for the patient. It will also cause a problem when leaflets are updated. Manufacturers have stringent safeguards in place to ensure that the assembly of the leaflet and the medicine in one pack are carried out with strict quality control measures. These safeguards could not be removed without a resulting risk to patient safety. Another problem is that leaflets come in many sizes, shapes and colours, and sometimes the information is contained on the packs themselves, making photocopying difficult.

The main reason why patient packs were introduced was to respond to the growing desire of patients and their carers to understand more about the condition affecting them and its treatment. Beyond that, it was recognised that there were considerable advantages in patients understanding the need to take the right dose of the medicine for the correct duration of the treatment. Studies have suggested that only about one third of all patients take their medicines exactly as instructed, one third comply more or less, and one third do not comply — a situation that must be improved.

These are among the reasons for introducing patient packs on the wider scale that bring economic as well as commonsense benefits. Medicines that are not taken properly by patients are, effectively, wasted. These benefits have long been recognised by health care professionals, by the industry and by the Government.

The industry has kept its side of the bargain, it is now time that Government kept its side. The Government has previously cited cost as a reason for not pushing ahead with the full-scale implementation of the scheme, but any costs would be significantly less than envisaged originally since most manufacturers now produce patient packs. Furthermore, any additional costs would be low compared with the investment and commitment already made by the pharmaceutical industry, and compared with the money currently being invested in the NHS to the benefit of patients. Surely, for the reasons of patient safety and the greater effective use of medicines, the Government should complete what has already been taken so far by doctors, pharmacists and the pharmaceutical industry.